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SUBJECT: WEEK OF PROTESTS CONSIDERED A SUCCESS BY OPPOSITION

¶1. SUMMARY: The Awami League (AL) and its 14-party alliance declared a 36-hour hartal on June 13 and 14 on the heels of their "siege of Dhaka" program. The hartal appeared to be better observed than previous ones, with some incidents of violence. The AL views the action as a success, and has announced a series of new protests including a "siege" on the Election Commission (EC) for June 20. END SUMMARY.

¶2. The AL and its allies declared a 36-hour hartal from 6 AM on Tuesday, June 13 to 6 PM on Wednesday, June 14. The hartal was a follow-on action to the "siege of Dhaka" on Sunday, June 11 that effectively shut down several key transportation routes into the city for several hours and led to some violent clashes between law enforcement officers and protestors.

¶3. Compared to other recent hartals, this 36-hour hartal was relatively well-respected, though it was more strictly observed on the first day than on the second. There was almost no traffic in downtown Dhaka on Tuesday, June 13 and most shops on the main thoroughfares were shuttered. However, by Tuesday evening truck traffic had begun to appear on the streets. On the morning of Wednesday, June 14 the city was again shut down, but the hartal began to lose its discipline with traffic starting to flow by mid-day.

SOME VIOLENCE...

¶3. Although the hartal was not very violent there were still some incidents worth noting. At 5:30 AM on the morning of June 13 five shots were fired at the house of Election Commissioner Justice Mahfuzur Rahman in the Mohammadpur section of Dhaka. No one was injured in the attack, and the police brought two night guards from the building in for questioning. At approximately 3:45 PM on June 14 three Molotov cocktails were thrown at the apartment building where Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) M.A. Aziz used to reside. The CEC, who currently lives in government housing elsewhere, was not in the vicinity of the attacks, and the bombs caused only superficial damage.

¶5. The most serious public disturbance occurred on Wednesday morning in Kamrangirchar in southwest Dhaka. The Kamrangirchar police station head and several officers were beaten up after they detained a local Awami League leader. A two-hour clash between AL supporters and police reinforcements ensued, with the protestors using sticks and throwing bricks and the police retaliating with tear gas. The police chief required 14 stitches for a head wound, and several other protestors were also injured.

BUT TO THE OPPOSITION, A SUCCESS

¶6. Dr. Mahiuddin Khan Alamgir, a member of the AL Presidium, defended the right of the AL to call the "siege" and hartal, saying that this was a political culture "based on the democratic rights that Gandhi fought for" and that "civil disobedience is the only option left when democratic processes fail." He argued that since the AL had been denied a voice in the Parliament as the democratic opposition, its only recourse was to take to the streets.

¶7. Bangladesh Observer editor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, an informal advisor to Sheikh Hasina, told PolOff that the AL considered this week's action a success. However, he attributed the good turnout and participation at least in part to frustration about price increases, gas shortages, and the constant electricity problems, issues that the opposition seems to have started to tap into more successfully. Chowdhury echoed Dr. Alamgir's statement that the AL felt it had few options other than to take their protests to the streets, though he acknowledged that the AL risked a public backlash if it resorted to this technique too frequently.

MORE FOCUSED PROTESTS IN THE COMING DAYS

¶8. On Wednesday evening AL president Sheikh Hasina announced a series of further protests. This new program emphasized more modest and focused actions, rather than new hartals. The program includes a demonstration in Dhaka on June 16, a country-wide demonstration on June 17, a "siege" of the Election Commission in Dhaka and district election offices across the country on June 20, and a transportation blockade across the country on July 2. She told the press that in developing this new strategy, the AL-led alliance had taken

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into account the suffering that hartals tended to cause, particularly for the poor.

COMMENT

¶9. Most AL officials are interpreting the week's activities as a success. However, the modest follow-on program could mean that the AL is trying to think more strategically, capitalizing on its perceived success this week but not wanting to overreach. By focusing on the Election Commission, which has come under increasing criticism from the media, the opposition and even some factions of the ruling coalition, the AL sees a potentially easy win within its grasp.

¶10. The AL is walking a fine line right now. On the one hand, it wants to do everything it can to discredit the BDG before it leaves office. However, it does not want to instigate so much chaos that it prompts a harsh reaction. That being said, the temptation for the opposition to fall back on hartals as its principle method of agitation may be too great, particularly if the new round of focused protests does not generate the degree of public interest this week's program did.

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